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SUBJECT: OREL: VULNERABLE GOVERNOR CREATES OPPORTUNITIES
FOR OTHER PARTIES

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Meetings during an early-February visit to Orel region suggested that a variety of factors could combine to make the March 11 regional elections very competitive. Rumored infighting in United Russia (YR) and an unpopular YR-affiliated governor have allowed the Communist Party (KPRF) to remain within striking distance of the Kremlin-sponsored United Russia party. The second Kremlin-approved party, Just Russia, appears to be benefiting from heavy financing and is in the race as well. Smaller parties and independent candidates are using door-to-door appeals in an effort to overcome the advantages of the majors. End Summary.

United Russia: Burdened by an Unpopular Governor

2. (SBU) United Russia currently holds 34 out of 50 seats in the regional legislature and aims to retain its majority in the March 11 regional election. Although the percentages vary, local polls show YR with a mere three percentage point advantage. Local observers, including Governor Yegor Stroeve, who has been in power for over 20 years, and is now a United Russia member. Local journalist Sergey Tyurin claimed that Stroeve is perceived as not having successfully cultivated a relationship with President Putin, to the detriment of the region's economy. The local electorate, according to Tyurin, is tired of a Governor who promises, but does not deliver.

3. (SBU) Stroeve's unpopularity has reportedly led to infighting within United Russia. United Russia leader and First Deputy Governor Pavel Merkulov, who suffered a surprise defeat in the 2006 Orel mayoral election, alluded to the problems caused within the party by the Governor in telling us that United Russia would demand "accountability" from Stroeve as it went into the elections.

4. (SBU) In a separate meeting, the NGO "Civic Resource" President Yelena Kastornova did not think that a poor track record necessarily complicated YR's efforts to remain on top. Other parties were promising a lot, she said, but United Russia would reap the benefits associated with stability. In a February 8 meeting, Patriots of Russia Chairwoman Yelena Krachnakova conceded that some had done well under United

Russia, but asserted that they were a minority: only twenty percent of likely voters.

KPRF: Looking to Capitalize

15. (SBU) In the March 2006 mayoral election, Aleksandr Kasyanov unexpectedly and narrowly won on the KPRF ticket taking 29 percent of the vote to Merkulov's 26 percent. At a meeting with civil society and human rights activists, the "United Europe" Institute's Dmitriy Krayukhin attributed Kasyanov's win, despite the heavy use of administrative resources for Merkulov, to the Governor's unpopularity and the support of civil society activists, the press, and the KPRF rank-and-file. While ruling the need to work with the KPRF, Krayukhin thought it was the only option for those wanting to create a true opposition to YR and Stroeve, since all other parties were co-opted and the "against all" option had been removed from the ballot.

16. (SBU) Although KPRF has only five deputies in the current regional legislature, many interlocutors in Orel described the region as "red." They note that KPRF Chairman Gennadiy Zyuganov is a native son and that KPRF voters are disciplined and hence much coveted by other parties. KPRF's Vasiliy Ikonnikov told us separately that local businesspeople who are out of favor with United Russia were now financing the KPRF. Many observers predicted that the KPRF as a result would run a close second to YR in March.

A Just Russia: Bringing in the Cash

17. (SBU) Although Just Russia has negligible poll recognition, no one doubts that it will finish a strong third

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thanks to generous campaign financing. The Orel party office during our visit was swarming with young people collecting stacks of campaign material to distribute. Just Russia is paying approximately USD150 per week, more than one month's average salary, to distribute campaign materials. Just Russia's Marina Ivashina confirmed that all financing was coming from Moscow. Just Russia is mounting a PR campaign that will portray YR as a party that talks, while Just Russia "does." Tyurin suggested that Just Russia would portray itself as close to Putin in order to win votes.

SPS: Importing Strategists...and Localizing Its Message

18. (SBU) In a February 7 meeting, Sergey Tarasov and Oleg Repin described SPS's message in Orel as "additional money for pensioners and those who depend on federal assistance." SPS, buoyed by its unexpected second place finish in Perm (where it garnered 16 percent of the votes in the October 2006 election), has brought in campaign workers from all over Russia to get its message across. It is relying largely on face-to-face campaigning as media access is complicated to access and expensive. The party's goal is to win in enough regions to effect change at the federal level.

Smaller Parties and Independent Candidates:
Door-to-Door Canvassing

19. (SBU) The ballot also features LDPR (popularly predicted to win its "usual" 10 percent), the Democratic Party of Russia, Patriots of Russia, People's Will, and a host of independents on the individual candidate lists. Most of these parties are optimistic that they will get at least one seat. They and independent candidates are focusing their

efforts on door-to-door canvassing with the expectation that a personal connection will instill greater confidence in prospective voters. Independent candidate Olga Kurmova, who is running on a platform of helping families, children, and older people, firmly defended her ability to vote independently should she be elected. "United Europe" Institute's Krayukhin was more cynical about the independents, alleging that many were actually United Russia proxies who are fearful of being tainted by association with the Governor.

Yabloko: Off the Ballot, but on the City Council

¶10. (SBU) Yabloko's Konstantin Fedotov explained that his party had not been registered, despite collecting a sufficient number of signatures, because its documents had not been bound together as required by law. Fedotov claimed that Regional Election Commission Head Anatoliy Trofimov had been willing to overlook the requirement and accept the signatures the next day, but was preempted when the national daily Kommersant reported Yabloko's exclusion. Trofimov himself told PolOff that Yabloko had not submitted its signatures on time. Fedotov further noted that litigation would be pointless as inevitable court delays would render the matter moot. "United Europe" Institute's Krayukhin dismissed the idea that Yabloko's exclusion was politically motivated. He pointed to what he said were Fedotov's local government ties and claimed that Yabloko in Orel was in reality an adjunct of United Russia.

¶11. (SBU) Fedotov confided that the Moscow branch of Yabloko had refused to finance the party's Orel efforts. (Fedotov is on the City Council and hopes to raise Yabloko's profile in the region by undertaking high profile social projects and supporting local businesses.)

The Governor: A Liability

¶12. (SBU) At a February 8 meeting with civil society activists, the consensus was that Stroevev was similar to an "oriental despot." Orel oblast had fallen behind economically; in part, participants surmised, because Stroevev was hostage to a circle of obsequious advisors. Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Stroevev had been able to rely on federal connections to ensure that pensions and state factory salaries were paid, and had been able to

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"order" that factories be built. The governor, however, was unable to manage the realities of today's Russia, even with a daughter in the Federation Council.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) The level of dissatisfaction in the oblast has created real opportunities for parties other than United Russia to believe they have a chance to get into power. None of the parties is doing a remarkable job of distinguishing itself from the pack. However, as the campaign progresses, structural features -- like the festering dissatisfaction with Governor Stroevev -- could make this contest much closer than YR's inherent advantages suggest it should be.
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